

Writing Intensive Courses: Proposal Guidelines

The University of Pittsburgh was one of the first in the nation to recognize and promote the value of writing in the disciplines. Since the 1980s, the Kenneth P. Dietrich School of School of Arts and Sciences has offered writing-intensive (W-courses) courses in every academic major. Dietrich School students must complete two W-courses, one in their major field of study, in order to fulfill the General Education Requirements.

W-courses at Pitt treat writing as a powerful mode of inquiry. Students who write frequently—in any discipline—not only develop strong writing skills but also extend their thinking and propel their learning. In a good W-course, both students and teacher can see that writing instruction advances content learning rather than competing with it.

Across the Dietrich School, faculty members design and teach W-courses that integrate writing thoroughly into the semester's learning experiences. Interested faculty may propose a new W-course, or seek the W designation for an existing course, by submitting a proposal to the Dietrich School Undergraduate Council.

Requirements for Writing-Course Proposals

The Dietrich School Undergraduate Council reviews proposals for W-courses in the same fashion as proposals for other General Education Requirements, with additional scrutiny provided by one or more faculty members with expertise in disciplinary writing and/or the broader requirements of a writing-intensive course.

Deadline. Course proposals must be submitted to the Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences Undergraduate Council by November 1 for the subsequent summer and fall terms, and by March 15 for the subsequent spring term.

Documentation. In addition to the materials required by *Dietrich School Undergraduate Council*, W-course proposals must include the following documents:

1. *A schedule of writing assignments.*
2. *Two complete assignment handouts.*
3. *A brief explanation of the scheduled revision.*
4. *An outline of projected in-class writing activities.*

Schedule of Writing Assignments

One traditional model of college teaching has students turning in a long term paper at the end of the semester. In this model, students write the paper “on the side,” without any assistance from the class or the instructor. Often they do very little writing earlier in the term, except perhaps on exams.

The writing-intensive course offers a productive alternative to this model. In a W-course, writing occurs throughout the semester, not just at the end of the term, and serves as a mode of learning

as well as a way of reporting what one has learned. When students do complete a complex final project, their work emerges from a sequence of earlier writing assignments.

Brief, informal assignments may ask students to practice certain kinds of thinking and writing particular to the discipline; students may then apply this kind of thinking or writing to a longer, more formal project. Alternatively, students may write sections of a complex culminating project over the course of the semester, to be reviewed by the instructor and revised before being integrated into the final paper.

Faculty proposing a W-course must provide a schedule of assignments. The course calendar should make it clear that students:

- will begin writing early in the term;
- will write regularly throughout the term;
- will receive instructive responses between assignments;
- will revise some of their work significantly; and
- will write between 20 and 25 pages in all.

Assignment Handouts

Students who are writing throughout the semester benefit from completing a variety of related assignments. Instructors should provide a thorough written explanation of each assignment, either in the syllabus or in a separate handout, to help students understand how to complete it successfully.

Faculty proposing a W-course must provide two sample writing assignments. These documents should:

- explain the purpose of the assignment, in relation to the trajectory of the course or the work of the discipline;
- describe briefly a process for successfully completing the assignment;
- make explicit the instructor's expectations regarding form, style, and content; and
- identify the criteria by which the writing will be evaluated.

Ideally, sample assignments will also illustrate the relationship between a substantial end-of-term project and the work of earlier assignments.

Revision

Revision is an essential element of a writing-intensive course. While careful editing is certainly an important part of this process, a W-course revision should involve much more than correcting mistakes. Substantial revision assignments can encourage students to reconsider their earlier assertions, to formulate and pursue further questions, to develop more complex answers, or to grapple with new ideas.

Students need support if they are to revise their work in this way. Instructors can coach them through the process by planning in-class writing workshops, guided peer consultations, and discussions of disciplinary models, as well as by providing written comments that focus on substantive issues. The course calendar should allow sufficient time for these activities between

the draft and a scheduled revision. Thus, it is important to begin work on the revisions well before the last week of classes.

Faculty proposing a W-course must provide a document explaining the role of revision in the course. This document should indicate:

- what piece or pieces students will revise;
- when in the semester the revision will occur; and
- how the instructor will help the students move from draft to revision.

Writing Instruction

When writing plays a critical role in student learning, in-class writing instruction assumes a greater significance. Thus, once a W-course instructor has designed a series of assignments, the next step is to plan classroom activities that will support students as they attempt the intellectual tasks those assignments demand.

Instructors may fruitfully use class time—before and after the assignment—to:

- introduce disciplinary writing conventions that apply to the assignment;
- examine texts that exemplify the kinds of writing and thinking required in the assignment;
- initiate brainstorming sessions or informal writing to generate ideas for the assignment;
- help students practice the kinds of thinking and writing required in the assignment;
- guide peer consultation groups in discussing student drafts;
- lead workshops that suggest possibilities for revision; and
- address common problems with usage, grammar, and style.

Faculty proposing a W-course must submit a document in which they discuss the writing instruction they will provide. This document should indicate:

- when class periods will be set aside for writing activities;
- what activities the instructor will lead; and
- how these activities will help students progress in their writing.